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Burning Bridges: The problem of relations in object-oriented ontology—a topological approach

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the status of relations in object-oriented ontology (OOO). On the one hand, objects often seem to get the upper hand, since *what* an object is cannot be reduced to the sum total of its (external) relations. On the other hand, there cannot be a hierarchy between object and relations, since we would then be talking about a vertical ontology, and what OOO advocates is a *flat ontology*. Relations must have the same ontological status as objects, due to the flatness of reality. Furthermore, relations already play a role in the things themselves in terms of an internal relationality. *What* an object is cannot be separated from *where* it is. In other words, the object is its where. While internal relations seem to work at the central core of objects, external relations pose the greatest problem. If objects are destructible, we have to re-evaluate the status of external relations. While OOO is still to develop a fully-fledged theory of destructibility or death, I suggest that Kierkegaard's notion of finitude can provide a fruitful trajectory. With Kierkegaard, I argue that death cannot merely be located within an object but concerns the radical outside which brings the status of external relationality to the fore.

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Introduction

This paper aims to show that object-oriented ontology (OOO) is also a topos-oriented ontology (TOO), a term which incorporates the Greek term for “place” [τόπος]. TOO emphasizes the topological dimension of objects, something which, as we shall see, lies at the center of OOO although it is not so frequently explicated. My aim is to explore the basic pillar at the heart of this new tradition: the fact that *objects are not identical to their relations*. The difference between objects and relations needs further qualification and investigation. My claim is that by invoking the notion of place, we can simultaneously detect the role that relationality actually plays in OOO, since place is about both objects *and* relations.

First, I outline two different versions of flat ontology: Heidegger’s topology of Being (TB)¹, and Harman’s ontology of objects. While the former relies on a model of inter-dependency, the latter advocates independency. These two models are in constant negotiation with one another in the different versions of OOO, and will provide the background for the discussions that follow.

Second, I go on to address two different strategies of re-organizing reality after Kant in what is known as speculative realism (SR): a substantivist strategy, and a topographical strategy. While the two strategies often intermingle in the attempt to map reality, the question concerning the nature of individual objects is simultaneously linked to a notion of place in the concrete analysis. As we shall see, the problem about *what* an object is is closely tied to *where* it is. Following the traits of place in OOO also leads us to the notion of limits and boundaries.

Third, in the last section, I narrow my focus to analyze one specific object in particular—Kierkegaard’s notion of the self. I demonstrate that Kierkegaard is in accord with OOO with regard to several important points. First, the notion of the self meets the basic criterion of being an object. Second, the question about *what* the being of the self consists of is linked to the notion of finitude. While finitude makes up one of the basic pillars of OOO, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to develop a fully fledged theory of death. Kierkegaard provides ammunition for such a task. The negotiation between independency and inter-dependency peaks in this trajectory. I conclude by demonstrating that Kierkegaard and OOO can benefit from one another because they both operate with two different notions of relationality: an internal and an external notion. And while Kierkegaard often emphasizes the former, OOO tends to problematize the latter.

This paper is a work in progress (part of a larger project), so I will merely present some key ideas that need further attention and exploration in the future. One ambition is to pair “alien phenomenology” (AP) with a “phenomenology of the alien” (PA), i.e. to re-think the philosophy of existence on new terms within the broader framework of SR in general and OOO in particular. If a keystone in the latter can be characterized as the response towards the inter-rupture of radical otherness—what Waldenfelds calls a “PA”—I think this should be paired with a philosophy of objects—what Bogost calls “AP”. TOO is the name of this Frankenstein project. I suggest that the resources for such a settlement is already available although unexplored in the works of Kierkegaard. On the one hand, it is quite uncontroversial to claim that Kierkegaard is a thinker of radical otherness and hence belongs to camp PA. On the other hand, it seems rather controversial to claim that Kierkegaard also has a foot in camp AP. Few attempts has been made to read Kierkegaard into the SR-framework (see Burns, 2010, 2015; Assiter, 2015). However, the pairing of Kierkegaard with OOO is new and needs a thorough preparation which I have done elsewhere (Wilde 2019). In this paper, my focus will be on the notion of death for two reasons. First, Harman’s three main definitions of death can be found in Kierkegaard as well although in a different context. Second,

Kierkegaard has a fourth definition that challenges Harman’s notion of the destructibility of substance but works within a topological framework of objects.

Flat ontology, but then what?

OOO is a rather new orientation within contemporary metaphysics. While often associated with the *speculative turn*, with 2009 as the official year one due to the SR event held at Goldsmiths College London, the seeds of OOO were sown as long ago as the late 1990s. On the one hand, OOO refers to an umbrella term made up by Levi Bryant including different positions—Harman, Morton, Bogost and Bryant himself. On the other hand, OOO has been adopted by Harman to refer more explicitly to his own position. Despite their internal differences, this group of thinkers all try to bring objects back to life from the cemetery of pre-critical outcasts - but they do so in a new way. Harman’s OOO or guerrilla metaphysics argues for the autonomy of objects on the one hand, and seeks to explain how relations between such isolated entities are possible nevertheless on the other. The most striking point in Harman’s position is not only that the golden age of the *Homo Mensura* is over, but that the human relation to the world, the *for-us*, is rejected as ontologically significant. Harman walks the plank on this matter. There is neither a “strong” subject at the center as the Archimedean point of departure (cogito, transcendental ego, Geist, Dasein), nor a “weak” subject at the periphery subjected to an overwhelming otherness such as the *es gibt*, the *il y a*, the *event* or other types of abysmal limit-experiences—not even a ticklish subject (Žižek). There might be a subject, but only as an object among objects. Like Meillassoux, Harman attempts to “think outside the box” of the correlation—the unbreakable bond between thinking and being which, according to Meillassoux, has dominated continental philosophy for two centuries since Kant. Unlike Meillassoux, Harman does not seek to get past finitude and (re)think the *absolute*. Rather, he maintains the condition of finitude but distributes it to include the relation between two objects and not to be a stumbling block restricted to the relation between human and world alone. Like Gabriel, Harman argues against an all-encompassing system of everything and *de-totalizates* reality in favor of a pluralistic model. Unlike Gabriel, Harman does not attribute the context—a field of sense (FOS), in Gabriel’s terms—the status of conditions for objects, but starts with the object unbound from all relations. Like Bryant, Harman develops a theory of objects in the broadest sense possible. Unlike Bryant, Harman does not advocate a type of materialism where objects need a material mediator between them in order to relate. Rather, Harman takes his point of departure in the *withdrawal* of objects.

What the members of the OOO school share is the notion of a flat ontology where reality is viewed as non-hierarchical and irreducible. Everything which exists does so on an equal footing. However, these parameters can result in at least two different models. Consider the late Heidegger’s notion of the fourfold and Harman’s weird realism. Both positions present two versions of a flat ontology. One of the main differences between Harman’s ontology of objects and Heidegger’s TB is that while the former is based on an independency model, the latter relies on inter-dependency.

Interdependency vs. independency. Heidegger’s infamous notion of the fourfold [*Geviert*], as presented in detail in his 1949 lectures in Bremen (*Insigt into that which is*), makes up the very King’s road of his thinking after the turn. The fourfold is Heidegger’s new concept of the world. It is a dynamic unity of four regions—earth, sky, gods and mortals—each reflecting the others without being

identical to one another. The model can be said to be flat in the sense that the regions are equiprimordial and no region has dominance over another. However, the tipping point for Harman, in his critique of Heidegger, is that while humans or mortals might be de-centered, the entire structure still depends on human existence in order to be. Erase the human from the fourfold, and the rest will fall with it (Harman, 2009, p. 294f). However, this is also the case if the god region were to vanish, or the earth or sky. Even so, there is a difference because the gods are not beings in the same sense that mortals are beings, although Harman does not interpret any of the regions of the *Geviert* as “beings”.² The gods have already fled or “vanished” in the sense that they are in fact *absent* and not empirically present; or rather they exist not as present or absent entities, but as hints (see Mitchell, 2015, p. 170). If mortals have to be empirically present as embodied beings capable of dying, in contrast to the gods as hints located in-between the Being–being distinction, what does the common definition of *regions* refer to? What if the human species becomes extinct? Could they still occupy a space in-between Being and being, inhabiting the shrine of Nothing (death as an in-between medium) (Mitchell, 2015, pp. 227–235) in terms of their *absence*? In other words, the gods have an effect even though they do not exist as empirical beings. Could mortals too arrive as hints beyond any distinction of presence–absence? If we don’t read “mortals” as “beings” but as a region that essences, it wouldn’t seem implausible that it could shift from appearing to withdrawing, like earth and gods, respectively? If this is not the case, the inter-dependency model risks losing the prefix “inter-” and could reinstall a hierarchical structure in which three of the regions in fact depend on the fourth and final one—the human—in order to be. And if mortals are characterized by their ability to die, as Heidegger suggests (Heidegger 2012b, p. 17/Heidegger 1994, p. 17), we might ask whether mortals in the plural could in fact include the entire human race. Furthermore, if mass extinction is off the table, at least as a possibility, how can the death of mortals in small groups or even just the death of a single individual be possible? Where should we draw the line between one mortal, mortals, and the entire species in terms of their ability to die? Even though death, for Heidegger, means something else than an empirical event, the complete exclusion of *any* “evential” sense of death—to borrow a term from Romano—will, at the end of the day, lead to a scenario where mortals are “*capable of dying*” without ever “*actually dying*”, whatever we take “mortals” to refer to.

Harman’s worry is that if we adhere to the inter-dependency model, there is no room left for individual subsisting entities, because how could there be? If an object’s reality depends on whatever relation it might have to something-other-than-itself, it cannot exist without such a relation and hence, it cannot be an individual subsisting entity after all. Relationality gets the upper hand in such a constellation, and the ontological hierarchy is back on track. What is wrong with this conclusion? Shouldn’t we just accept the consequences?

No, because in Harman’s view objects come first: “objects will be defined only by their autonomous reality. They must be autonomous in two separate directions: emerging as something over and above their pieces, while also partly withholding themselves from relations with other entities” (Harman, 2011, p. 19). This is an anti-reductionist account. An object is a withdrawn reality—what Harman calls the *real object* (RO)—and it is somehow partly open for contact. Harman calls this aspect of restricted accessibility the *sensual object* (SO). An object cannot be reduced to its basic components such as atoms or particles, since the object as a whole has properties that cannot be found in the tiny building blocks taken in isolation. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, if the object is nothing more than what it does, i.e. if its entire reality is found in its relation to other things³, its existence would be exhausted by

its current givenness. But then nothing new would ever emerge (Harman, 2011, p. 12). For something to change, the object must hold something in reserve from what it currently does, otherwise we end up with a frozen status quo (actualism), with no possibility of anything new arising. However, if an object can *never* be whatever relation it enters into, how are relations at all possible?

How can we get past this problem? Is it possible to think some sort of middle ground where objects maintain their ontological autonomy and specificity, and yet at some level or to some degree participate in relations?

The ontological democracy. If the primacy of relationality is gone, does this mean that relations can only be derivative of two already existing objects? Take Ian Bogost’s paradigmatic formula: “*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*” (Bogost, 2012, p. 11). The difference is easy to see, if we invoke what Levi R. Bryant, with a term borrowed from Samuel Alexander, has called “the democracy of objects.” This is a strictly ontological term, where every-thing has the same basic conditions, “they equally exist”. But some things then rise and gain influence and significant status, “they do not exist equally.” If we consider the birth and death of an object or the coming-into-being of something, the formula still holds, but we might qualify this distinction between, let’s say, the ontological equality and the ontical inequality. We might add, “all things equally exist *insofar* as they exist at all” or “*as soon* as things exist, they do so on an equal footing...” Could it be that independency works on the level of ontological equality, and inter-dependency on the level of ontical inequality? By way of example, I am an object and I have not always been here. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for my parents. My coming-into-existence *depended* on my parents having sexual intercourse some time around December 1988, my mother getting pregnant, and me being born (among an endless list of other factors). In this sense, my parents and I are ontically unequal because me being here depends on them but not vice versa. However, we are still ontologically equal since I am not my parents and I cannot be reduced to a mere result of them—a sperm cell fertilizing an egg-cell forming a zygote and through cell-division, the morula, blastocyst etc. into an embryo, an infant, a child, a teenager, an adult etc. I am something more than that. I exist just as much as they do. And as soon as I exist, my existence—the “am” in “I am”—does not depend on their existence. When they die, I do not die with them. Then consider a more radical example. The sun and the human being equally exist, yet they do not exist equally. If the human race becomes extinct, the sun does not burn out with us. But when the sun burns out and dies, we certainly die with it. The sun belongs to the sky region of Heidegger’s fourfold, so it makes perfectly good sense to claim that if the sky falls, we fall. In this sense, we *depend* on the sun in order to exist, but the sun does not exist *more* than we do. We are not identical to the sun, and nor does this star exhaust everything we are. The same goes for humans in relation to some objects like artworks. If the human species becomes extinct, art would no longer exist. This is a view Harman himself holds. Whether this notion of dependency or inter-dependency has any share in the democracy of objects, where what there is exists on an ontological equal footing or only runs business on the ontical level, depends on how we understand relations.

The what and the where

The problem is how to draw the line between ontological equal independency (objects equally exist), and ontical unequal

dependency and/or inter-dependency (objects do not exist equally). The line to be drawn cannot be drawn since it is changing and shifting all the time. We are not cartographers in a stable block universe of isolated monads. Limits are mobile. But by their very definition, limits mark something off *as* something, otherwise it wouldn't be "a something" at all. On the other hand, it cannot be the case either that we end up in a model where everything is simply said to be in an endless flux of interchanging relations. Relations must be relations *of* something in contrast to something *else*. What about this something? What is it that makes an object *this* rather than *that*? This is the question of specificity, what-ness, individuation, identity, uniqueness. In short, the problem of substance. These demarcations reflect a certain mapping. In SR, the Tetris game of (re)organizing reality after Kant comes in two frameworks: a substantivist one, and a topographical one. The former divides reality into *what* there is (e.g. things, objects, entities or humans, non-humans, more-than humans, natural kinds, matter etc.). The latter divides reality into *where* something is (e.g. regions or domains, fields, the in-itself, the for-itself, the world-without-us, the great outdoors, the fourfold etc.). In many cases, the two frameworks intermingle. As we shall see, this is also true in the case of individual objects. The *what* cannot be isolated from the *where*. In the following, we shall take a closer look at how *what* and *where*, object and place, interact with each other.

Notes and Firewalls. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), Harman introduces the term *firewalls* as being linked to the following question: "in what does the being of a thing consist?" (Harman, 2005, p. 96) Firewalls are concerned with the *where* (i.e. the limitation of an object), and have two functions. First, they concern the formal criterion of substance in contrast to mere aggregates: "what prevents any arbitrarily weird assortment of things from becoming a substance?" (Harman, 2005, p. 96) Second, they function as a bouncer and have nothing to do with relations, since "it concerns only the thing itself, what makes it tenable, what allows it to fend off everything not pertinent to it" (Harman, 2005, p. 96). Firewalls are blockages, bodyguards in bullet-proof vests shielding their objects with their backs turned to the potential shooters. On the other hand, objects also enter into indirect relations with one another. We need another term for this, since firewalls are unable to issue residence permits. Harman calls it *black noise*. Black noise is another word for "contiguity" or "adjacency" (Harman, 2005, p. 196, 201), and it functions as a Janus Head both granting and rejecting access between objects: "Black noise must not only link all the parts that stick their fingers into a new object, but also serve as the engine of hesitation and deferred gratification between things" (Harman, 2005, p. 196, 201).

If we turn to the *what* of an object, there are several candidates to be considered. The first candidate is *real qualities* (RQ). In contrast to accidental features or properties, RQs are what an SO needs in order to maintain what it is (Harman, 2011, p. 104). However, RQs also seem to play a crucial role in the case of ROs: "the pairing of real objects with real qualities is what allows real objects to differ from one another rather than being empty unified substrata with no definite character" (Harman, 2011, p. 50). But even though this is the case, the object *is not* its qualities. They are not identical to one another. Hence, qualities cannot make up the specific objecthood of an object. The second candidate is what Harman calls the *style* of an object: "We can say of any object that it is not a bundle of specific qualities, nor a bare unitary substratum, but rather a *style*" (Harman, 2005, p. 55). The style of a single object differs from that of others and cannot be found in any of its features, qualities or parts, but is the very

trademark of its own infrastructure i.e. "...the style of a thing animates its multitude of distinct and isolable qualities" (Harman, 2005, p. 57). But there is a problem in detecting the essence of an object in terms of style, since style is concerned with what the object *does*, i.e. "animating". The problem is that if the object is determined in the sense of what it does, emergence would be impossible. Harman calls the final candidate *notes*. In contrast to qualities, "an object is identical with its notes, and this is true for sensual objects no less than for real ones" (Harman, 2005, p. 199). The notes of an object are its "constituent features" (Harman, 2005, p. 183), but it is by definition "impossible in the case of real objects to determine exactly what these notes are" (Harman, 2005: 199). We might say that it is impossible to determine *what* notes are simply because they are not the "what" but the "where" of the object, or the *what is the where*:

while an object exists negatively in withdrawing from other entities, it must still exist positively somewhere. This "somewhere" is an interior reality that is not only unified under the aegis of the object, but is that object, since the interior of the object is nothing other than its essential notes, suspended in some still unknown plasma (Harman, 2005, p. 193).

The object is like a black hole withdrawn from view, yet still leaking radiant energy or releasing its fumes and powers into the world (Harman, 2005, p. 95, 181). The SO appears in the ether of accidentals, where vicarious causation takes place and the RO exists in a withdrawn vacuum. I shall return to Harman's concept of vicarious causation. In other words, objects exist both negatively and positively somewhere. An object is not exhausted by being *somewhere*, but is itself a *somewhere*. Objects are *places* in Harman's account.

What Harman has described, although without coining it by name, could be interpreted as a topology of objects. This interior realm or kingdom of an object is a topology marking off (withdrawal) and opening up (appearance), uniting, separating, limiting etc. In this sense, he is close to Heidegger, who states explicitly that things are not merely *at* a certain place but are themselves places (Heidegger, 1973, p. 6/Heidegger, 1983, p. 208). By introducing the term *ontography*, Harman does acknowledge this topological dimension. The term refers to the different combinations of RO and SO, as well as RQ and sensual qualities (SQ). More generally, "ontography maps the basic landmarks and fault lines in the universe of objects" (Harman, 2011, p. 125). Identifying objects with their own interiors, i.e. object = place, does not shed any light on the fact that objects are places nested within other places. In Harman's own words, "we have a universe made up of objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects" (Harman, 2005, p. 85). How should we understand this "wrapping" of objects unbound from all relations? What kind of spatiality is at work here when the object in which another object is wrapped cannot be a constituent feature of that object, since the object wrapped would then be determined through its relation to the object in which it is wrapped? But isn't this exactly the case, since an object cannot exist unless it does so inside *another* object?

Place and space. If TOO is concerned with the question of *where* something is, this "where" is not restricted to a geographical location with specific determinable coordinates. We cannot search for "the mind" on Google Maps and expect to get an exact location, for example. Place means something different in this context, or to use Milton's expression: "the mind is its own place." An object is an irreducible interior, but this infrastructure withdraws from any map - and yet it is still *somewhere*.

In *Form and Object* (2010), Tristan Garcia states explicitly what I claimed at the beginning: the *what* of a thing cannot be separated from the *where* of that thing. He says: “Where is a thing? What is a thing? These two questions amount to the same thing” (Garcia, 2014, p. 78). We can boil our inquiry down to two basic models. The first says: To be a thing (*what*) is to be in a place (*where*). This intimate connection between Being and place goes back to Archytas and Aristotle—to be is to be in a place (Casey, 1993, p. 14). The second says: To be a thing (*what*) is to be a place (*where*). The former can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, we might want to suggest that the “what-ness” of a thing is determined by “where” it is, i.e. by its environment. Animals adapt to their environment in order to survive. The “where” has a great impact of how animals evolve and what they are and become. But an animal’s “natural habitat” does not determine everything an animal is. Think of zoos or circuses, or the Tiktaalik that left the ocean 375 million years ago to walk the surface of the earth. And more importantly, what about inanimate objects like rocks, windows, iPhones and unicorns? The environment or habitat seems less important here, yet these objects are still *somewhere*. According to Garcia, “Each thing is in other things which are in other things” (Garcia, 2014, p. 78). While this certainly looks like a Babushka doll model of spatiality—I am currently sitting in an apartment, in Aarhus, in Denmark, in the world, in the Milky Way etc.—it suggests a metaphysical rather than a physical account. According to Garcia, I am also in “my flesh. I am in evolution. I am in history. I am in a square metre. I am in unity...” (Garcia, 2014, p. 78). To use a metaphor, we could say that “I” am distributed into an innumerable number of horcruxes. Second, the *where* does not have to be a specific *somewhere*. To be a thing (*what*) is to be in a place (*where*) *wherever* this is in particular. I am not determined entirely by being in Denmark. I can travel or move to a different country and get new citizenship. This change of environment will affect who I am, but *what* I am is not exhausted by any of these shifts in locations. I am not conditioned by being in an apartment in Aarhus, in Denmark or by being a traveler in the US; but I am conditioned by being *somewhere*. I cannot not be somewhere. On the one hand, I cannot not be somewhere. And yet I am not myself this somewhere through and through. Garcia puts it likes this: “A thing can be in another thing since these two things – comprehending and comprehended – are equally but separately in the world” (Garcia, 2014, p. 79). By way of example, considered as an object, an embryo is in the womb, is comprehended by the womb. The womb is objectively more than the embryo. These two objects are *unequal* (Garcia, 2014, p. 78). As a thing, the embryo is in the world neither more or less than the womb, since both things are equally in something-other-than-itself i.e. in a form. They are both separately alone in their form i.e. the womb (and-everything-other-than-the-womb), everything that begins infinitely where the womb ends, and likewise with the embryo i.e. the embryo (and-everything-except-the-embryo). As objects, the embryo and the womb are unequal, and the former is comprehended by the latter. As things, the embryo and the womb are equal, they are both equally alone in the world (Garcia, 2014, p. 78).

Harman includes space and time⁴ specifically in his theory. Space, for Harman, is neither an empty container (Newton and Clarke) nor a system of relations generated by objects (Leibniz), but the *tension between objects and relations* or between ROs and their SQs or accidents (Harman, 2010, p. 17). In *The Quadruple Object* (2011), he develops this notion of space. It seems that space is at the center of relationality because it is the site of relation and non-relation. Harman’s own example concerns himself sitting in Cairo. While he is there he is not without any relation to Osaka—the Japanese city—since he could travel there

at any moment. But he would never exhaust the reality of that city even if he were standing at its center (Harman, 2011, p. 100). *Space* is the “stretch” between the object’s withdrawn reality (RO) and its appearance (SQ):

This interplay of relation and non-relation is precisely what we mean when we speak of space, and in this respect Heidegger’s tool-analysis is actually about space, not about time as he wrongly contends. Space is the tension between concealed real objects and the sensual qualities associated with them (Harman, 2011, p. 100).

For Harman, an object is not located in space and time. Space and time are the offspring of a more basic reality: “the polarization between objects and their qualities” (Harman, 2011, p. 100). In the light of Harman’s own association with Heidegger’s tool-analysis and its important spatial character, we might emphasize another important kinship between them. If objects are places or *withdrawn interiors*, Harman’s account of the *what* and the *where* would fall into the second model: to be a thing (*what*) is to be a place (*where*). The first model includes thinkers like Bruno, who draws on Cusa, Epicurus back to Plato, where space is prior to place, i.e. “*space makes room for place*” (Casey, 1997, p. 124). The second model says something different: “*place opens up space*”. The latter is developed most explicitly in the late Heidegger. In *Art and Space* (1969), Heidegger himself makes such a link between thing and place and the relation between place and space, as we saw earlier. Heidegger says, “We would have to learn to recognize that things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place”; and he continues, “Place is not located in a pre-given space, in the manner of physical-technological space. The latter unfolds itself only through the reigning of places of a region” (Heidegger, 1973, p. 6). For Heidegger, a thing is not merely located somewhere in space, but is itself a place that first opens up a space. For Harman, objects are places, i.e. withdrawn interior realities (RO), but they are also *somewhere* in a more positive sense, i.e. in a space of appearance which is open for contact (SQ). *Space* is the tension between a negative and a positive “somewhere”, between the relation (the accessibility of the SQ) and the non-relation (the inaccessibility of the RO).

According to Jeff Malpas, place can be understood as a dynamic opening, a space occurring within bounds (Malpas 2017, p. 33, 42). Place also encompasses that which is present within it and has a content and character of its own. Place brings relationality with it (Malpas, 2017, p. 31). Malpas seems to follow Heidegger’s notion of equiprimordial regionality in relation to the fourfold, where the relation and the relata are not given priority over one another. Instead, relations depend on the differentiation of that which is related, but as Malpas makes clear, “This is not to privilege that which is related over the relation—or *vice versa*—but rather to recognize their mutuality” (Malpas, 2017, p. 43). Place is that which provides the dynamicity of sealing off and opening up. The bounded character of place has to be understood not only as a firewall, i.e. in a restrictive sense maintaining the individuality of an object, but also in a productive sense as there from which an object begins without ever becoming determinable and fixed. Malpas expresses it as follows: “the very character of the boundary as *connecting* at the same time as it also *separates* means that the identity of the place that the boundary defines is also indeterminate, with every place having enfolded in it, and being enfolding within, other places” (Malpas 2017, p. 47). Place would have a double function in the framework of OOO. First, place refers to both the *negative* and the *positive* somewhere (since they are each some “*where*”, i.e. place(s)) of the object, i.e. the withdrawn kingdom and the space of appearance. Furthermore, the bounded character of place should not be understood as the hyphen between objects and

something else. Rather, place is the *indeterminate dynamicity* of sealing off the object from other objects and opening up for partial contact between objects.

If space, in Harman's definition, is the "in-between" of the RO and the SQ, this does not say much. Even though Harman explicitly leaves out relations like those existing between car keys lying on the shelf and me sitting in the couch, in order to preserve the notion of relationality to a more active encounter, Peter Wolfendale is right to ask how Harman's model in fact explains such specific spatio-temporal relations (e.g. *x* is to the left of *y*) (Wolfendale, 2014, p. 192). Wolfendale also raises the question about "how proximity relations function as a condition for causal interaction (e.g., how 'touching' Osaka is dependent upon 'being in Osaka')?" (Wolfendale, 2014, p. 195). I want to pose a different question: Why is the polarization of RO and SQ not merely *spatial* but identified with *space* as such? The answer is that this polarization is more basic than space and is that which gives rise to space (as well as time). But even if we accept this, it is hard to see how some sort of spatiality is not already playing out at the core of objects. Take Harman's own example again (space as the relation and non-relation of Osaka and Harman himself). The relation—"when I travel to stand in the exact center of Osaka"—depends on the "sensual profile the city displays to me"; while the non-relation—"I will not exhaust its reality" depends on the fact that "this profile will differ from the real Osaka that forever withdraws into the shadows of being" (Harman, 2011, p. 100). Harman standing at the center of Osaka makes up a relation. Harman not being able to exhaust Osaka makes up a non-relation. This interplay, which Harman calls *space*, is the offspring of a more basic tension—between RO (the real Osaka) and SQ, (the sensual profile of Osaka). Hence, space does not occur as a medium within which an RO exists, but is derived from a tension between RO and SQ. So why is the withdrawal of RO ("the real Osaka that forever *withdraws* into the shadows of being") not spatial in character? Doesn't the activity of withdrawal need a medium? Withdrawal is movement, and movement presupposes space, as Malpas argues (Malpas, 2018, p. 49). So the activity of withdrawal must take place in some sort of spatial medium. If it doesn't, why not - and where does it then take place? Harman does seem to be aware of this problem in his more recent works though. He swaps the notion of "withdrawal" to that of "withholding" since the former "falsely suggests a supplemental act of movement rather than the non-presence of entities from the outset" (Harman, 2019, p. 592). In addition, Harman does in fact define the interior of an object as a *specific* space, "The interior of an object is demarcated as a specific space" (Harman, 2005, p. 254). While it might be a mistake to distinguish between specific space(s) (in plural) as the interior of objects and space as such as the tension between RO and SQ—because everything, even this tension, is on the interior of objects (Harman, 2005, p. 254)—there still seem to be two spatial structures. On the one hand, real objects exist in some kind of space, "...they inhabit some still undefined vacuous space of reality..." (Harman, 2005, p. 91). On the other hand, "the question here concerns the space in which reality unfolds [...] it remains unclear where this happens" (Harman, 2005, p. 94). There is no absolute space or space as such in Harman's account, but there are as many chunks of space-time as there are objects. But what is the specific *spatial* character of the space inhabited by RO and the space where interactions happen? This remains an open question, because the former is still *undefined* and the "where" of the latter is *unclear*. The former seems to go all the way down to the core of the RO, while the latter might be of the derivative kind which is further developed in *The Quadruple Object*. The latter is a place, i.e. a demarcated space, or to use Malpas'

formula: a space that occurs within bounds. The boundary already seals off the endosphere of the RO as a somewhere which is different/withdrawn from the exosphere—the space opened up where reality unfolds, which, of course is also an interior of another object.

The status of relations

What about the problem of relation, then? First, OOO holds that there is no difference in kind between the relation of human beings to pollen, windmills, oxygen etc. and these objects' relation to each other. Second, OOO adopts a metaphysical (not a physical) approach to relations (Harman, 2005, p. 1). There is a distinction between vacuum-sealed entities *and* relations which is often referred to as "a rift" or "a gap" (Harman, 2005, p. 2, 5, 192). Harman seems to be interested in just *how* relations between distinct, separate objects are possible, and not so much in *what* a relation is. However, he does address the latter eventually. First, he often invokes the language of "entering into" when talking about relations (Harman, 2005, p. 85, 174, 183). And when he speaks of relations, he uses terms like "communication", "collision", "effect", "interaction", "bump, crush, meddle, carouse, affect, nurture, damage", "translate", "form", "link", "contact", and "impact" (Harman, 2005, p. 2, 19, 20, 73, 105, 193, 246). This vocabulary tells us two things. First, relations are "located" between objects, which means that two objects are required for there to be a relation. Second, all these terms share a basic feature—they signify an *activity*. Furthermore, relation as such is most often invoked in terms of what it cannot do: it cannot connect two objects *directly*. Any relation is indirect or *vicarious* (Harman, 2005, p. 165, 174). If two objects cannot relate directly, they must relate by means of something else. These proxies are called *elements*. An element "*is a sensual object incarnated in highly specific form*" (Harman, 2005, p. 194). The notion of relation as an activity is further supported by Harman's most explicit definition: "The numerous keys and toothpicks lying before me can obviously be said to relate to each other in a certain sense, but we have been employing the term 'relation' for a *closer kind of fusion between parts that give birth to a new thing*" (Harman, 2005, p. 195 emphasis added). How, then, should we characterize such fusions?

The trichotomy of relations. There are basically three types of relations according to Harman:

(1) *physical* relations, (2) *sensual* relations, and (3) *causal* relations. Of the first, Harman says: "When we speak of the things themselves, the duality between their sheer unity and their plurality of traits, let's refer to these as physical relations" (Harman, 2005, p. 98). The word "physical" does not refer to the "material", but to the Greek *physis*, "as pertaining to all that belongs intrinsically to any object" (Harman, 2005, p. 98). Of the second kind, Harman says: "When we speak of the relation within the heart of things as perceived, let's refer to sensual relations" (Harman, 2005, p. 99). And, "finally, when we speak of the interaction between separate objects, let's refer to causal relations" (Harman, 2005, p. 99). Even though an object was defined by means of being in a vacuum *free of all relations* (Harman, 2005, p. 90), it is also at the same time relational, "Every object is both a substance and a complex of relations" (Harman, 2005, p. 85). If an object is a complex of relations and a "vacuum free of *all relations*", the latter can only concern *external* relations but not internal ones. This complex of relations seems to concern the interior of the object itself, because "an object must relate both to other objects and to itself, and *both relations must occur vicariously*" (Harman, 2005, p. 94). So for a start, there seems to be something we could call external relations (inside-out) and

internal relations (only within). The latter seems to involve whatever is going on inside the object—in its “secret withdrawn kingdom”—or what Harman coined *physical* relations. But just how intimate can this self-relation be? An object is said to be *identical* with its essential notes (Harman, 2005, p. 198), and hence there is no such thing as “black noise” (the medium where relations happen) between the thing and its notes (Harman, 2005, p. 204). It seems that in order for there to be a relation at all in Harman’s model, there must be a case of *non-identical* things, which also means that relation *cannot* occur at the heart of something *identical* to itself. No relation can occur between an object and its essential notes because they are one and the same. Hence, *a relation can only be a relation of things that are not identical to one another*. Let us call this the first principle of relationality (PR1). An object’s internal relation cannot be a relation to its notes then, only to its parts, which also have the status of objects in their own right. Let us call this the second principle of relationality or simply PR2: *two objects are required for a relation to occur*. Obviously, PR2 is a consequence of PR1, or rather they are two formulations of the same principle.

Relation-substances. Now, one of the interesting consequences of Harman’s notion of relation is that “if every object can also be considered as a set of relations between its parts or qualities, it is equally true that any relation must count as a substance” (Harman, 2005, p. 85). In addition, “any genuine relation is already a new object, since it has all the familiar properties of an object: unity, withdrawal from all relations, a surplus of reality beyond any of its discernible features” (Harman, 2005, p. 188).

This discovery raises some questions. If a relation is also an object, it does not only obey PR1 and PR2 but must meet the basic criteria of being an object in both the negative and the positive sense: as something which is withdrawn which also has essential notes that make the relation *this* rather than *that*. The problem is the following: If a *relation* is an object, it follows that the relation is itself “free of all relations”. This can only make sense, as we saw previously, if the relationality in question is of an external kind. Hence, the relation can only be “free of all *external* relations”, since if a relation was free of all relations whatsoever (both internal and external ones), we would end up with a relation which is not a relation. If a relation is an object, it cannot be exhausted by what it currently does, otherwise it would not meet the criteria of being an object with a withdrawn surplus. So all the verbs used to describe exactly what a relation is (“to link, communicate, collide” etc.) cannot exhaust what the relation is. The relation is more than what it does, i.e. “*relating*”, since it also simply *exists* as this rather than that. But if the relation as an object must be “free of all external relations”, existing independently of something-other-than-itself, we end up with a relation that might not relate anything. In other words: the essence of the relation (as an object) cannot be found in its *activity* of “relating two distinct objects,” since that would involve the *relata* (something other-than the relation) becoming a constitutive feature of the relation. As an object, the essential notes of the relation can only be found in the relation itself and not in something external to it. Hence, the essence of the relation cannot be to *relate* between two distinct objects *if* these are external to the relation itself. But in order for a relation to occur at all, we need two objects which are not identical to one another (PR2). If the relation *only* relates internally to itself, it risks being a non-relation or an infinite regress. It cannot relate to itself in terms of its essential notes, since it is identical to them (recall: an object is identical with its notes with no black noise “in-between”), and no relation occurs in what is identical to itself (PR1). Hence, if the relation relates internally to itself, it must relate to what it “consists of”, namely its *related* elements, because we need two objects in order for the

relation to exist at all (PR2). The only option left is that the relation relates to something-other-than itself, (which is the only way relation is possible (PR2), since it cannot relate to what is identical to itself (PR1) *without* these being external to the relation itself. However, there seems to be another problem. For something to “enter into” a relation, this inter-action must happen on the interior of a third object namely on the interior of the relation which is itself considered a substance. However, in order to “enter into” the interior of a third, (which serves as the *substitute* or *indirect* medium between the *relata*), this third object must already exist, otherwise the two objects cannot enter into it. But this is not possible, since then we have presupposed what we wanted to explain. Harman’s solution to this problem is as follows: “objects must meet beforehand inside of another object, and second, they will play off against each other as black noise on the interior of their own relation” (Harman, 2005, p. 205). In other words, “they begin life as side-by-side caricatures on the inside of something else, and end up as side-by-side caricatures even on the interior of their relation with each other” (Harman, 2005, p. 205). If the caricatures are said to be *interior* to the relation and not exterior to it, it is possible that the essential notes of the relation could be found here, after all. Harman says, “The notes of the relation are none other than the sensual objects that lie at its core” (Harman, 2005, p. 203). By way of one of Harman’s own examples, in the case of a human relating to a rose: “The rose and I both point down into the same infernal inwardness of the rose-and-I-relation” (Harman, 2005, p. 203). The relation is not apart from or part of the “rose-and-I-relation”, but is the whole “*rose-and-I-relation*”, which is the only possible explanation of how the caricatured sensual objects—“*rose-and-I*”—can be the essential notes of the relation, since they *are* the “*rose-and-I-relation*”, or simply the relation as such (Harman, 2005, p. 226). Sometimes Harman seems to use the term “notes” synonymously with “qualities”, for instance: “The green of a flag or a mosque is not some sort of abstraction grafted onto a lumpy underlying material, but is already the green of these objects. It is a note set aflame with the reality of the object to which it belongs” (Harman, 2005, p. 185). In this sense, it seems as if there actually can be some sort of exchangeability of notes, at least between sensual objects: “There is a leakage of individual notes from the essence of the thing, without which the object would have no sensory reality at all, since it would be a sheer unity without handles for perception to grab onto” (Harman, 2005, p. 185). Ultimately, Harman admits that relationality lies at the heart of the object itself and not merely as something different from it, “No object is only substantial or only relational [...] Any object can be considered simultaneously under both aspects” (Harman, 2005, p. 227). In other words, “the difference between objects and relations is not a difference between two specific types of things, but between two moments in each thing” (Harman, 2005, p. 90). This shift from one moment to another is topological. It is nothing but the indeterminate dynamicity of separation—sealing off the object as object and connection—opening up the object as relation.

Still, how do objects that meet beforehand inside another object *end up* on the interior of the relation? And how can the notes of the relation (identity), although internal to it, be the caricatured sensual objects of other withdrawn objects without violating PR1? Whatever the answer, it seems that the basic problems of relations between externality and interiority orbit around the intimate connection to *place*, since the notion of the external and the interior is topological in character. Furthermore, the simultaneity of the substantivist aspect and the relational aspects require a dynamicity of opening up and closing off, exclusion–inclusion, which is itself essential to place. What Harman has addressed so far is finitude in terms of limits—or to use his own term, *firewalls* that belong entirely to the thing itself and have nothing to do with relations. But there is a stumbling block here, because what happens when an object is destroyed?

What happens when I die? If no object can touch another object directly or exhaust its reality to the core, is death even possible? In the following, I present Kierkegaard's notion of death as another aspect of finitude that can be said to be both internal and external and neither of the two.

The end of objects?

The human being is not erased from the equation of reality in OOO, but is simply placed on the same ontological footing as everything else. So what happens when we push the zoom button and focus on the human being in particular? What about the subject in the universe of objects? Does the ontical focus on humans bring something new to the fore in relation to what we have discussed so far? The question about what makes something *this* rather than *that* was shown to have an intimate relation to place, limit and boundary. In the following, I take Kierkegaard's notion of the *self* as my case study. I argue that the self is also a limited and bounded place. This is most significant in the case of *death*. What is the self according to Kierkegaard?

Kierkegaard's finite self. Kierkegaard defines the self as a relation that relates itself to itself: the self is in fact *not* the relation or a relation but *self-relation* (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 13/Kierkegaard, 1849/2012, SKS11, 129). The infrastructure of the self consists of dynamic dyads of an unspecified number of opposite poles—relations between the finite, the infinite⁵, possibility, necessity etc. and a synthesizing of these poles. The self is more than what it consists of, since it is neither the relation nor the *relata* but something third. The self is what we could call an *internal* relation (self-self) in contrast to an *external* relation (self-other). The self synthesizes the different *relata* of the relation. But the self is not only what it currently does—its formal function of synthesizing—because it also *becomes* what it is. To become oneself is a movement at a place and not a movement from one place to another (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 36/Kierkegaard, 1849/2012, SKS11, 151). There is no teleological endgame inscribed in the structure of the self as a process, because I do not become another or merely anyone. What I become is nothing but myself. In short, any self is *one self*, and each self is subject to becoming *oneself*. In this sense, the self is not identical to pure process. The self is something or someone, an individual [*hiin Enkelte*], in contrast to someone else. Furthermore, the self or the individual appears as someone *for* someone, but is not identical to this appearance (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 87/Kierkegaard 1847/2011, SKS9, 92). Hence, the self can be said to withdraw from the realm of appearance. Spirit, according to Kierkegaard's pseudonym (V. Haufniensis) is defined first of all in a negative sense, i.e. by being a negation of its own non-ground (anxiety) from which it originates. Using various attempts (the existence spheres), spirit tries to posit itself as the ground (sin) in face of its non-ground. The self, according to another pseudonym (Anti-Climacus) is not just a unified whole but contains a split within its internal relation (despair) of being and not being itself. The self qualifies as an object in Harman's notion. It is an autonomous reality that cannot be reduced to what it consists of or what relation it has to something-other-than itself. This leaves us with the following model: the self is both itself (self-relation) and not itself (becoming). However, the self also has an external relation to what is other to it, since it is not itself the ground of its own existence (self-other).

Where does the self begin, and where does it end? This question is far trickier when we talk about "the self" in contrast to material things like clementines, tables, jugs, sardine cans or cats sitting on mats. However, the self must still be *limited* or *bounded* (this self rather than that self). Otherwise there is nothing to

prevent it from fusing into its surroundings and becoming "absolute spirit", which is one of the things Kierkegaard wants to avoid. Finitude, for Kierkegaard, functions as a limit that belongs to what it limits. The finite is one of the poles within the self—a *relata* of the relation. It is also a boundary between the self and something exterior to the self. Death constitutes a prime case with regard to this issue, since the self is primarily finite in the sense of its mortality. The constitution of spirit, as it is worked out in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is simultaneously the constitution of mortality.

The destructibility of objects. What is *death* in the framework of OOO, then? First, we must ask the following question: if real objects, in Harman's version, withdraw into a sealed, inaccessible private vacuum that no other entity can fully penetrate, are we all protected in ontological safe spaces where not even the scythe of the grim reaper can reach us? No! Paradoxically enough, objects, like Aristotelian substances, are in fact destructible (Harman, 2017, p. 202). So how should we understand death? Is death a feature of an object, is it itself an object, or is it a relation between objects? If death is the feature of an object, is it incarcerated somewhere in the interior, and does it only release its force when it breaks free eventually, or is it a slow process of change? When does an object pass its sell-by date? Is it a question of internal decay, a continuous but slow disintegration of the object from within? Is aging an act of death turning the crank handle on the barrel organ playing my life melody towards the end? No, there can be no acoustics for such tunes playing requiems in the sealed vacuum chamber, because the real object is not changing all the time but remains the same, at least to some extent, through childhood into old age. I am still me. If death is not a process of disintegration at the heart of the object, could it be a certain strike? Do I, me, the "self", disappear into thin air, like when Doctor Manhattan kills Rorschach leaving blood stains on the snow? Puff! And the real object is gone, only the traits remain? In some sense, this must be what happens in the Epicurean notion of death. When I am, death is not; and when death is, I am not. What makes the transition anything else than an event?

The second option is to view death as an object itself. It sounds strange to talk about death as an object, since it is not clear whether it even meets the basic criterion for being an object (being irreducible to whatever it consists of and whatever relation it might have to something else). Death, in the case of humans, is impossible without *someone* who dies. In this sense, it depends on something without itself being this something or someone. Death is not the reaper waiting to attack, and I am not myself the reaper. It might be possible to interpret death as an object, but this would require a broader outline. The third option is that death must be a relation between two existing objects colliding and creating something *new* that was not there before, since the end-of-something is the emergence of an absence in the world. Option three does not rule out option two, since a relation is itself an object according to Harman. So what is death? Here are three possible definitions.

Harman says, "*the death of an object arises from the excessive strength of its ties*" (Harman, 2016, p. 124). The context of this definition is his analysis of the Dutch East India Company; and even though this object goes through symbiotic stages, its *death* is not so much a processual disintegration. Rather, it has to do with the sudden weakening of strong ties (relations?) to something else on which it depends, and without which it is dissolved or dies (Harman, 2016, p. 124). We could call this definition: "the *relational* sense of death." There also seems to be a phenomenologically inspired notion of death, as well. Harman quotes Morton's definition: "death. As he (Morton) puts it: 'When the

inside of a thing coincides perfectly with its outside, that is called *dissolution* or *death*. Given a large enough hyperobject... all beings exist in the jaws of some form of death..." (Harman, 2017, p. 234). We could call this definition: "the *conditional* sense of death". Furthermore, both the sudden death of an object and the traits left behind, as in the case of Rorschach, seem to be included in Harman's notion of death: "The death of an object can sometimes precede its literal end by a good while, since it is often the case that a thing lives on in name only" (Harman, 2017, p. 124). We could call this definition: "the *gradual* sense of death".

Kierkegaard's quadruple sense of death. If we turn to Kierkegaard, death has several meanings that do not necessarily contradict the definitions given by OOO but enrich our understanding all the same. All three definitions are at work in Kierkegaard as well, but there is also a fourth definition without which the three others don't make sense. First, we might want to distinguish between biological death and spiritual death. One can be "a living dead" but biologically alive or biologically dead, living on by name in the memories of others or in some sort of post-burial cultural life (Mooney, 2011, p. 141). This is akin to *gradual* death, as Harman described it.

More importantly, death is also a *condition*. Man is constituted as Man by his/her finitude. To be constituted as spirit is at the same time to find oneself as a mortal being. Death is an ontological condition. Like Morton's image of being in the jaws of death, Kierkegaard uses the image of an axe already being at the root of the tree. *That* we are going to die is certain, but *when* we are going to die is uncertain. Death is hence a continuous possibility in terms of *when* and a certain fact in terms of *that*. In this sense, death or finitude is a boundary in the Heideggerian translation of the Greek *horismos*, "that from which something begins its presencing", and as Casey adds, "a place is indeed an active source of presencing: within its close embrace, things get located and begin to happen" (See Casey, 1997, p. 63). Human existence begins in both an ontological and an existential sense with finitude. When Adam became spirit, i.e. capable of relating to himself, he was at the same time mortal. Kierkegaard also compares humans to angels, with the latter being regarded as the most boring of all beings (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 352/Kierkegaard 1846/2009b, SKS7, 358). Why? Because they live forever. It is precisely because life is finite for us humans that it matters. This is what Kierkegaard means by calling death a teacher. It teaches earnestness (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 75/Kierkegaard, 1845/2009c, SKS5, 446). In the face of death, life begins existentially. In this sense, we might say that death is *relational* in terms of this teacher (death)–pupil (human) relationship. Naturally, this cannot apply to any object whatsoever, but only to creatures like us.

However, death cannot merely be a relation in terms of linking two objects to one another. Remember, a relation in Harman's sense can only occur as a "close fusion" of two already existing objects creating something new (PR2). Death would then become a *threshold* between let's say me and not-me. For death to be a relation, it must also form a new substance existing in its own right, which means that the essential notes of this *new object* must be the caricatured sensual objects (elements), i.e. the I-and-not-I existing on the interior of the I-not-I-relation (death). But for death to make sense at all, the I cannot be said to be an element of that relation because an element is merely a caricature of the withdrawn real object (the real I). And because it is the latter and not the former which is said to die (owing to the destructibility of substance), it won't do to put the element alone in the relation. Death cannot occur in the "I" alone, either. If death is an *internal* relation of the I, it cannot concern the object and its notes since no relation is possible between them due to their identity (PR1).

Hence, it might be an internal relation within the I between itself and its qualities or parts, e.g. my heart. Death could be the weakening of my strong ties to my heart; so when it stops pumping, I die. But the parts are objects in their own right, so they too would withdraw as real objects in the part-not-part-relation. Second, the real qualities without which an object wouldn't be what it is can only be used as a candidate for what makes an object *this* rather than *that*, but do not concern the very existence of the object. Death, on the contrary, is precisely about the very existence or rather the non-existence of the real object. This leaves us with two possible options. Either death is somehow at the core of the real object itself, or it is radically outside. If we go with the former, the object would become a ticking bomb. Every destruction would be a self-destruction, an implosion. Death would always be an instance of suicide. What, then, prevents the object from destroying itself immediately and fusing into its surroundings (which, in Morton's definition, was said to mean the death of an object), and how would that work with the firewalls of the object which were introduced precisely to prevent such an "*apeironic*" event from happening?

More importantly, when we talk about the death or destruction of an object, we automatically invoke the concept of *time*. According to Harman, time, like space, is an offspring of a more basic tension. Whereas space was defined as the tension between RO and SQ, time is the tension between SO and SQ (Harman, 2011, p. 100). Two points should be made here. First, the idea of time emanating from this tension has been questioned by Wolfendale. In his essay "Space, Time, and Essence: An object-oriented approach" (2008), Harman asks the following: "Is time finite or infinite?" Under the object-oriented model, time unfolds only in the interior of an object. As long as objects exist, time must exist. The question can thus be rephrased as follows: "must objects always exist?" (Harman, 2010b, p. 166) In a critical comment on this particular passage, Wolfendale says: "this subordination of time's *extent* to object's *persistence* simply presupposes a deeper time in which they might or might not persist" (Wolfendale, 2014, p. 198). In short, Wolfendale argues for a deeper time prior to Harman's notion of a "surface time", which is akin to the question we asked before, about a spatial medium in which the movement of withdrawal takes place, as prior to the type of spatiality that emanates from the tension between RO and SQ.

Second, if time is located at the epicenter of the SO–SQ interplay with no connection to the rumbling in the deep shadowy underworld of RO, how is it possible for an RO to be *destroyed*? Would death or destruction not involve a time *when* an RO *is* and a time *when* the same RO is no more? On the one hand, this seems to be the case. If we recall what we called "the *relational*" and "the *gradual* sense of death", the former involves a weakening of the ties of an object, which means it happens *over time*, and the latter involves a fading away of the object. Recall, an object "can sometimes precede its literal end by a good while", which involves temporality. On the other hand, when Harman talks about what prevents objects from fusing into one another in a sudden flash, he states that time would not exist if it weren't for such "buffering" or "obstacles". But the principle of delay, he continues, does not originate from the withdrawal of real objects but from the realm of sensual objects, and hence, "...real objects are in a sense outside time" (Harman, 2005, p. 215). However, if we return to the essay "Space, Time and Essence", Harman says: "An object will not vanish from the universe unless there is a cause for its doing so" (Harman, 2010b, p. 166). This passage indicates that the key to unlock the coffin is not wrapped around the neck of the RO itself.

The last option is that death must be something radically outside the object—an external event. Let us return to

Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, death is not a threshold between two states: “If it is certain that death exists, which it is; if it is certain that with death’s decision all is over; if it is certain that death itself never becomes involved in giving any explanation—well, then it is a matter of understanding oneself...” (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 83/Kierkegaard 1845/2009c, SKS5, 452). This is a key quote. First, death offers no explanation, which means it becomes a matter of understanding oneself as an existent individual. As the boundary of life, death is that from which life begins its presencing. In short, death is about life—to understand life differently in the light of one’s mortality. Furthermore, death *exists* and it is death’s decision that all is over. Remark, *all* is over. Death is an absolute and it can only be so *if* it actually happens. Even though death is “not yet”, the *not-yet* only makes sense on the basis of the inevitable *to come*. Death must be a *real event*, full stop. As David Wood remarks, “Death, for a living being, is an absolute. It is not just an event in the world but the limit of the possibility of certain kinds of events (such as *my* experience)” (Wood, 1998, p. 58). If death is an absolute event, it cannot merely exist in a relation *to me*, since it is the annihilation of *me*. Meillassoux makes a similar argument. If death can be conceived as “the capacity-to-be-other”, i.e. as the very possibility of our own “non-being”, it must be an *absolute* possibility. If the possibility of my non-being only exists *relative* to the correlate of my act of thinking it, the possibility never becomes actual. Hence, “I think myself as mortal only if I think that my death has no need of my thought of death in order to be actual. If my ceasing to be depended upon my continuing to be so that I could keep thinking myself as not being, then I would continue to agonize indefinitely, without ever actually passing away” (Meillassoux, 2009, p. 57). Even if we say that death is *outside* thinking but not outside “me”—as an embodied being—it doesn’t help, because what we want to explain is the “death of a substance”.

Leaving aside the ontological problem of suicide, *me dying* is not an act of the self but death’s decision. Hence, death is *external* to me or something-other-than-me. It is not found within the self-relation. If death was nothing but a condition tied to the infrastructure of the self, it wouldn’t happen at all. Why? If death depended entirely on the self-relation in order to be, the very annihilation of the self-relation would mean the annihilation of death as well, which would result in the opposite of death (non-death), which annuls the event and the self simply continues to exist. Death, in order to be real, cannot merely be conceived as constitutional, gradual or relational, but must be an *absolute outside*. What, then, about this outside?

If death is akin to *nothing*, we need to ask about the nature of nothingness. Is nothing an object? It is notoriously difficult to describe nothing without violating “it” and getting off on the wrong track from the start. “It” might be withdrawn or simply “withdrawal as such”, and in Kierkegaard’s sense, at least in *The Concept of Anxiety*, “it” has an effect since it begets anxiety. “Nothing” is not merely this effect, but even so it sounds strange to claim that “nothing” should be something more than what it “consists of”, since it does not consist of anything. If it did, it wouldn’t be nothing but something. On the other hand, could it be that even *nothing* without being a (some)thing still has a *form* in Garcia’s definition, i.e. everything-else-except-nothing? Even so, “nothing” only meets half the criteria for being an object in Harman’s definition – is it perhaps a quasi-object? “Nothing” plays a constitutive role for Kierkegaard in the coming-into-existence of spirit, but not in terms of a causal relation. It might be the same with death. We might need to invoke Kierkegaard’s notion of the *instant* in order to explain what death is. The instant cannot be said to be an object either; but it is certainly an event, and while it cannot be explained through the substantial

and/or the relational aspect of objects alone, it operates topologically, since it is a “taking place”.⁶ But we still face the problem about the (de)termination of death: death is impossible without someone or something that dies, although it is not itself this someone or something. We might turn it the other way around and say that death is not about *something taking place*, but about *nothing taking place*. In other words, death can in fact touch the core of the real object because it is not itself an object. Perhaps death harbors the very border between inside and outside, the slash between neither/nor and both/and? It is neither inside nor outside, but no-where. Could it be that death in this sense pops up like a jack-in-the-box from nowhere, and like the Greek Morai cuts the string between me—not-me without being either of the two?

Conclusion

What role does relationality play in OOO? In a de-hierarchized, flat ontological landscape of objects, relations are one among other such objects. They do not exist more or less than objects since they are themselves objects. However, two different models arose from this point of departure: a model advocating independency (Harman), and another defending interdependency (Heidegger). There are pros and cons in both cases, but basically it is possible, at least in a formal sense, to distinguish between ontological equality (“all things equally exist”) and ontical inequality (“all things do not exist equally”) by pairing Bogost’s and Heidegger’s terminologies. The mobile limits between the two were illustrated with the case of birth or the coming-into-existence of something. Both levels are constantly negotiating with each other and do not present a layer cake ontology, but a topology of relations between objects. Furthermore, in the attempt to map reality after Kant, we came across two strategies in SR: substantivist outline and a topographical outline. The pins are either directed towards *what* there is or *where* something is, and often combine the two. The problem about relations in OOO was then explored in detail throughout Harman’s *Guerrilla Metaphysics*. We detected two basic principles of relationality: PR1 (*there can be no relations between what is identical to itself*), and hence PR2 (*two objects are required in order for a relation to occur*). Furthermore, a relation was identified as an object in its own right. This conclusion resulted in a peculiar and hardwired knot when we considered the death of an object. By comparing Kierkegaard’s notion of the self with the basic insights of OOO, we were able to explicate the role played by death in terms of finitude as linked to limit, boundary, internality, externality, relationality and place as such. Death was shown to have several different meanings: a conditional, relational and gradual meaning. However, in order for all these definitions to make sense at all, death must at the end of the day also be an absolute real event taking place radically outside the object that dies. But in this model, we still face the obstacle concerning the determination of death—death is impossible without someone or something that dies. One suggestion would be to consider death along the line of nothingness striking from no-where, i.e. as something neither inside the object nor outside but nowhere—an event of nothingness.

Even though there is a lot of work to be done in order to detect the exact role played by limits and boundaries of objects and relations at the heart of OOO—and we have merely scratched the surface—it seems absolutely clear that *place* is not an additional remark or a footnote but a key document in this new tradition. In other words, OOO *is* and must also be a TOO. In short, OOO is a TOO, too.

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Notes

- 1 Even though the centrality of place is developed more explicitly in the late Heidegger, it runs through his entire philosophy (as Jeff Malpas has argued). The notion of a flat ontology can only be ascribed to Heidegger's topology of Being (TB) in terms of the fourfold [Geviert], and not to his fundamental ontology (FO) in the context of *Being and Time*, since the outline here takes its point of departure in the analytics of Dasein. In short, FO is human-centered, while TB is human-decentered.
- 2 Heidegger talks about the gods in *Contributions*, but he does so not in terms of beings nor Being but rather as belonging to a realm which is still withheld (Heidegger, 2012a, 2012b: 16, 192/Heidegger, 1994, p. 18; Heidegger, 1989, p. 244). It is less clear, however, whether or not "mortals", as presented in *The Thing*, can be interpreted along the same lines, since he says: "the mortals are the humans" (Heidegger, 2012b, p. 17). For a thorough analysis and outline of the fourfold (see for instance, Vycinas, 1961; Fell, 1979; Harman, 2002; Mitchell, 2015).
- 3 Harman uses the words "object", "thing", and "substance" interchangeably.
- 4 Unfortunately, I cannot address the matter of time and temporality within the framework of the current paper. It deserves a paper of its own, or even a book-length discussion. However, I intend to touch upon this issue in a planned forthcoming project in a dialogue between Harman, Garcia, Bryant and Kierkegaard, among others.
- 5 I tend to explore the formal structure of the self as *topos*, i.e. as an irreducible unity sealed off as a concrete self with an internal relationality as well as opened up towards an external otherness. There is a structural similarity to Harman's objects, at least on a formal level (the level of ontological equality). The way in which the specific *relata* of the self-relation should be understood cannot be applied to any object whatsoever, but belongs to the specific case of human selves—the level of ontic inequality. Does the notion of *infinity* as well as *immortality* not conquer the notion of a *finite* self? Two brief remarks need to be made here. First, it is clear that immortality, for Kierkegaard, is linked to recollection and ideality. It is less clear, however, that immortality should refer to something like an *eternal form* existing somewhere in a cosmic archive. But in order to make room for both mortality and immortality, the latter could refer to the fact that *as soon* as I exist, this basic constitution or fact cannot be undone. So in this sense, could it be eternal? But is that really immortality? Second, and more importantly, if we read the specific notion of *finitude* or mortality as being related to its opposite—infinity and immortality within the self-relation—they refer to ontological constitutions of the self. In the *Concept of Anxiety*, for instance, Adam might be said to be immortal prior to the constitution of spirit as self-relation (the self) because finitude co-originate with self-awareness at the moment Adam becomes aware of himself as a self (self-relation). Hence, what is immortal is merely a *latent* form of the self before it is constituted as self-relation. The self as self is not immortal in the sense that Adam is in the Garden of Eden. Eternity, infinity, immortality as re-collection and ideality belong to the cognitive capacities of the self, which is posited along with finitude or mortality in the constitution of spirit. The self can only have a grasp of immortality because it is mortal. Why? If the self wasn't mortal, it wouldn't be a self at all. What happens in the constitution of spirit is the establishment of *bounds*, since the self-awareness of Adam is also a topological awareness, i.e. "me" (I am *here*) as distinct from what is "not-me" (what is *there*): "The Garden of Eden was closed; everything was changed, the man became afraid of himself, afraid of the world around him" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 127/Kierkegaard 1843/2009d, SKS5, 131). What we can say for sure, then, is that immortality and eternity at least refer to the self's capacity to reflect upon these categories.
- 6 David Kangas offers the most accurate definition of Kierkegaard's notion of the instant, when he says, "An instant cannot claim to be. Of itself it is nothing, it is nowhere; it neither is nor is not. And yet everything changes in the instant" (Kangas, 2007, p. 4). Once again, we might claim that even the instant has a form, i.e. everything-except-the-instant, but this doesn't help us very much. To say that the instant consists of "something" or has certain basic features like being "comparable to the atom of eternity", or being "impossible to define", or that it has some sort of "transformative power", is to hypostatize it too much. Recall, "all objects equally exist... insofar as they exist", but the instant cannot even claim to do that – it neither is, nor is not.

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